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A study of Symbolism in the select short fiction of Shashi Deshpande

It was Dark, Lucid Moments and My Beloved Charioteer

Abstract

Writing of the highest kind is distinguished by the commanding use of similes, metaphors and imagery that pave the way to symbolic representation in literature. Though symbolism in literature can be traced back to the time that people started writing, Symbolism as a movement in literature began with the French writer Baudelaire and many writers across the globe were inspired by the movement. Many poets made effective use of symbolism in their poems. Though it was primarily a movement that influenced poetry, it also left its mark on fiction. Shashi Deshpande is one of the reputed Indian English Fiction writers whose writings are rich in

symbols. Since a lot of research has already gone into her novels, I made an attempt to study some of her short stories and analyze how the felicitous use of symbols have enriched her stories.

Keywords: Symbolism/symbol, similes, metaphors, Shashi Deshpande, gender, short fiction.

Introduction

“The term "symbol" is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself.”

(Abrams 311). Some symbols are conventional and their significance is culture-specific. A specific cultural logic defines the symbol system of every society; and symbolism helps in establishing communication between members sharing the same culture, though in a subtle manner. Similarly, we have symbolism in literature. In literature, we find a systematic use of recurrent symbols of images in a work to create an added level of meaning (1). But there are some symbols that the writers use, which are personal therefore causing difficulties in interpretation. Literary historians claim that the Symbolist Movement designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire (*Fleurs du mal*, 1857) and including such later poets as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry. They advocated the doctrine that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the natural and the spiritual worlds. As Baudelaire puts forth this doctrine:

"Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the spiritual as in the natural world, is significative, reciprocal, converse, correspondent.”

The techniques of these French Symbolists had an immense affect on the European and American writers like WB Yeats, EE Cummings, Arthur Symons, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens etc.

In his introduction to Ursula Brumm's *Symbolism and the novel*, Shiv K. Kumar says: "Since symbol hunting has become such a popular sport and since symbols in prose fiction have become such a sure sign of literary worth, Ursula Brumm thinks that it is time to examine the true nature of symbols and their real function in the novel. She acknowledges, at the outset, that realistic fiction may contain symbols which reinforce the meaning, but symbolism in the full sense provides us with a transcendent embodiment of the meaning."

For ages, writers have used symbolism to their advantage. It is one of the most powerful rhetorical tools that help writers in embracing the good and bad of life in a meaningful and distinct manner. We have already seen that symbols are devices by which ideas are transmitted between people sharing a common culture. Writers use several figures of speech like imagery, metaphors, similes and allegories to create symbolism. Indian writers in English have also put symbolism to optimum use in their writings. We usually find a profuse use of symbols in poetry, but Indian English fiction doesn't lag behind. When we examine modern writers of fiction in India, we find that a good number of writers have been influenced by symbolism. Studies have been conducted on symbolic representation in several novels of Indian writing in English, whereas the short fiction remains mostly unexplored in this aspect. Shashi Deshpande is one such fiction writer who has made use of the vehicle of symbolism to the fullest. The popularity of her novels was so enormous that it eclipsed some of the gems that she has produced through her short fiction. Deshpande in most of her works makes felicitous use of symbolism as a major vehicle to probe the innermost self of her characters. This article makes an attempt to identify and study some of the symbols used by Deshpande since it is integral to a better understanding of the themes of her short stories.

I have chosen three of her short stories for analysis here. The story "It was Dark" portrays the mental trauma of a family, where a girl of 14 years was raped by a man. The story throws light

on the different kinds of responses of different characters to this incident. The very title of the story, “It was Dark” is suggestive of many ideas. Here dark is not just talking of the physical darkness, but it is symbolic of the darkness in the life of the girl who got raped and also that of the gloom that spread in the lives of the parents who were coping with a hard time. The girl keeps repeating the phrase “it was dark “again and again. Here the darkness also suggests the taboo associated with the heinous crime in the society. How everyone responds to the incident (neighbours coming in to express condolences) is more painful than the incident itself. The protagonist (the girl’s mother) is reprimanded for not giving prior warning to the girl about her safety. Here darkness is also symbolic of the condition of women in the society. They are neither safe nor do they have the freedom to be/do whatever they wanted since that could hamper their security. This is reflected even in today’s world where it’s a common sight to witness people who would blame the “excessive freedom” given to women as a major cause for such crimes happening in the society.

We also encounter striking symbolism when the story opens with the protagonist coming out of an ugly dream where she was hopelessly searching for something all over an unfinished skeletal building. The vivid imagery of the dream is symbolic of a desperate mother searching for the key to her daughter’s emotions. The girl was totally unresponsive, and the mother was trying her best to make her talk. The dream is reflecting the mother’s state of mind. When the mother wakes up and responds to her husband's call, she senses the foul taste and smell of her mouth. This foulness of the mouth brings her back from the hazy world of the dream to the reality of the now and here. Here again, we can draw a parallel between the foulness of the mouth and the foulness of the situation that she’s in.

Throughout the story, we do not find any mention of the names of the protagonist, her daughter or her husband. The girl is referred to as “the child”, “she”, or “her”. This again is symbolic of the gender and the age of the girl. The husband is also referred to only as “he” or “him”. The effacing of the names is indicative of the fact that everything here boils down to gender. Things are looked at only in binaries - the male and the female genders. In the story, we also find that there is no mention made of words like “rape”, “pregnancy”, “menstrual cycle”(only once the word ‘pregnancy’ was used that too after some hesitation). Instead, expressions like, “it all started”, “what if something happens?” “No, it can’t”, “when is her next time?” are used. This is again symbolic of the taboo associated with these things in the Indian society of the times. Even a mention of it without any hesitation cannot be traced.

Another very striking image that we find is that of the girl sleeping with legs drawn up, looking like that of a foetus. This simile feeds visual symbolism - it can be suggestive of how very young the child is. The condition of the girl who is raped is similar to that of the tiny, delicate precarious condition of the foetus.

Similar abundant use of symbols is found in Deshpande’s story “Lucid Moments”. This story makes the reader ponder over some aspects of gender disparities in society. The story talks of a woman (the protagonist’s mother) who’s on her death bed and is quite disoriented. But during one of her lucid moments, the only thought that keeps troubling her is the fact that she doesn’t remember her mother’s name. It’s the “name” that the entire story revolves around. The moments of clarity of thought make her wonder why she never bothered to know her own mother’s name. People around always referred to her mother as ‘your mother’, but never took her name. Here, a name is symbolic of the woman’s identity. A woman is remembered by people only as someone’s

mother, daughter, wife or sister. She doesn't have an existence beyond these relations. Deshpande very subtly uses a name as being symbolic to identity.

The only ornament that she wants to adorn was the bindi. That made her feel that she had made herself up. In most Indian societies, bindi has got great significance to a married woman. It proclaims the married status of a woman. It gives the sick woman some kind of reassurance that all is well. The same symbolic use of bindi is reiterated towards the end of the story. When the woman dies, her daughter hangs to the wall a picture of the woman. She says:

“There! It's done. She doesn't need any flowers or kumkum. It's enough she's here. “

This is very symbolically loaded sentence. The flowers and the kumkum here stand for the assertion of the fact that the woman is married and that her husband is alive. A wife dying while her husband is still alive is considered a good omen. (The woman is considered sumangali). The protagonist now says that her mother doesn't need any kumkum or flowers. This suggests that the mother was weighed down all her married years by playing the role of a mother and a wife. Now at least after her death, she doesn't need any embellishments that would accord her some status in the society. She can be herself. Assert her own identity.

The story ends on another powerful symbolic representation. All the three women characters, who are left behind after the lady's death, start introducing themselves by their names, contrary to what usually happened... where a woman is called as someone's wife, sister or daughter.

The Protagonist: “She's your grandmother. Her name was sumati.”

The child: “And I, I am Karuna”

The Protagonist: “And I am Sujata”

The Protagonist's sister: “And I am Shilpa”

The above dialogues though uttered in a lighter vein, plays a significant role in reinforcing the major theme of the story. It shows how the protagonist (who was all the while troubled by the fact that she couldn't become a mother) starts pondering over her mother's desperate attempts to know the name of her mother. Here as we have already discussed, it's not just a name. It is the identity loaded in the name that forms the crux. These last few lines of the story are symbolic of how the modern woman is trying to assert her individuality, without getting bogged down in the labyrinth of relationships that have been defining her status in society.

“My beloved charioteer” is another short story of Deshpande that needs a peep in terms of symbolism. The story revolves around a mother, a daughter and a granddaughter who are caught in a very difficult situation after the death of the father and then the son-in-law after a few years. The daughter, who had already lost her father, totally loses balance over her life after the death of her husband. No one else and nothing else matters to her. The grandmother and the granddaughter find solace in each other's company. The story is enriched with many symbolic representations. The grandmother who had no comfort throughout her life was seeking comfort in the company of her granddaughter. Here the granddaughter is referred to as a charioteer since she's the driving force in the old woman's life. The child is the only hope that she clings on (and vice versa) to lead her life.

In her conversation with her daughter, she tells that her married life has been mere smoke and a bit of ash like the cigarettes that her daughter smoked. This metaphor has layers of significance strung to it. Smoke and ash symbolize harmful, toxic mater which would slowly vanish in thin air and become mere nothing. Smoke doesn't have any defined space to occupy and it just gets dispelled in the air. Such was her existence. Her marital life never bore any fruit. She was always insignificant in the lives of her husband and even her daughter.

Deshpande compares the old woman's outburst to that of a river during the monsoon. This simile rightly captures the mood of the woman who is overburdened by her welled up emotions and then just let it flow out one day. And then the ultimate one was when the woman compares her feelings on her husband's death to that of the child's feeling when the school is over and the bell rings. This comparison makes one stop and think what exactly the speaker must have gone through. Was she feeling relieved when her husband died? Was she enthusiastic to return home (to her own self?). These multiple symbolic representations make Deshpande's short stories a fertile land for good reading.

Most of her short stories embody symbolism even in their title. As we see in *My Beloved Charioteer* (already discussed), *Lucid moments* (Symbolic of those moments when a woman is not carried away by the predetermined societal stereotypes, and starts questioning,) *It was Dark* (discussed earlier), *A Wall is safer* (where a woman trying to build a fence around her house feels later that a wall is safer. The woman sacrifices her career as a lawyer to support her husband to pursue his passion. Here the wall is symbolic of forceful blocking of the view of the world outside which would remind her of her own forgotten career), *The Stone Women* (The beautiful, voluptuous stone women on the walls of the temple are symbolic of a man's desire - a man's imagination wants to see the woman with such perfect bodies.). We have thus seen how appropriate use of symbolism can not only make the text more comprehensible, but also add layers of meaning to it, thereby making the reading a very intriguing and compelling activity. And Deshpande's adept hand at symbolism is undoubtedly worth appreciation.

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